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COLORADO RIVER WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

“Once upon a time, the Colorado River was just Grand”

Believe it or not, it wasn't until 1921 that the Colorado River flowed through the state of Colorado. The river that now bears that name and its tributaries have been around for eons, but it took action by a Congressional subcommittee to tie the river and its namesake state together.

Prior to 1921, the Green River of Utah and the Grand River from Colorado converged outside of Moab, Utah to create the Colorado River. Colorado is a Spanish name that means “red-colored;” an accurate description of the silt-laden, untamed river that was often described as “too thick to drink, too thin to plow.” When the Colorado Territory was named in 1861, the names Jefferson, Arcadia and even Idaho, were among those considered for the new territory, but Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts felt Colorado would be more appropriate since “the Colorado River rose in its mountains.”

The presence of the Grand River, now the Colorado, spawned a host of other place names involving the word “Grand.” From the Colorado River's headwaters in Rocky Mountain National Park in eastern Grand County, the river flows west to feed Grand Lake, then proceeds further west to the Canyon of the Grand River, now known as Glenwood Canyon. After passing Glenwood Springs, the river continues west to a town that was formerly called Grand Valley, now Parachute, flowing further west into the Grand Valley in Mesa County where it joined forces with the Gunnison River at a place appropriately named Grand Junction.

The name “Grand River” was an abomination to Edward T. Taylor, a legislator living in Glenwood Springs. As a representative to Colorado's General Assembly and then as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Taylor kept pursuing his goal of renaming the Grand as a point of civic pride. To Ed Taylor, it was unjust that the Colorado River began 80 miles west of the Colorado border and that the name “Grand” be applied to the river because it would be, “...a meaningless misnomer. Practically everything in Colorado is grand!”

By 1921, Taylor had secured the approval of the governors and state assemblies of both Colorado and Utah to change the name, but needed Congress to officially approve the name change of an interstate waterway. Recognizing that the lowest 50 miles of the Colorado River in the U.S. was navigable, he petitioned the Congressional Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce to listen to his plea for name change. This committee was composed almost entirely of legislators from east of the Mississippi River and therefore had little at stake if the name were changed.

Wyoming, however, could also lay claim to being the headwaters of the Colorado River and would not be pleased by this maneuver. The Green River is the longer tributary reach of river, but not the one contributing the greatest volume, and traditionally the longest tributary is regarded as a river's headwaters.

Taylor beseeched the committee saying, "The name 'Colorado' does have a very great and affectionate significance to every human being on this planet." His impassioned plea found favor with the committee and the Grand River was formally renamed the Colorado in House Joint Resolution 460 of the 66th Congress.

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